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Signs of Backsliding Churches

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“And my people are bent to backsliding from me.”—Hosea 11:7

Is the present-day church following the Word and ways of the Lord and abhorring all that is otherwise? Is the fear of God, the love for truth and for God’s glory, and the desire to walk according to all God’s commandments prospering among God’s church? Before God and men, we must confess that, honestly, the answer is no. True, there may still be some outward truth, outward growth, and even outward spiritual privileges to an extent that the church of former ages scarcely possessed. But Israel could claim the same things—outward truth, outward growth, outward privileges—and yet they were backsliding...



A church tends to slide from a strong foundation. Therefore, God calls His church to be aware of how backsliding begins, how it thrives, and how it ends. We must be acquainted with Satan’s devices and methodical plans to bring the church into an abominable, backsliding condition. Under the light of the Holy Spirit, the history of Israel and the church reveals a clear pattern of step-by-step backsliding, a pattern we will consider in closer detail.

1. When the church begins to backslide, the first visible sign is usually an increase in worldliness. In everyday lives, in conversation, and even in dress and fashion, the spirit of the world begins to infest church circles. What crept ashamedly into the church before begins to walk in freely, often covered or overlooked instead of exposed and admonished. The black and white line separating godliness and worldliness becomes increasingly grayer.

Instead of walking in opposite directions, the world and the church begin to have more in common with each other, much to the church’s detriment. Some of its members begin going to worldly places, taking part in its entertainment, and befriending its people. Some take all kinds of modern media into their homes without even considering what controls they should exercise; consequently, they quickly become addicted to today’s worldly mentality.

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Worldly people, worldly entertainment, worldly customs, worldly places—is this not what Hosea warned against when the Spirit directed him to write, “Ephraim hath mixed himself among the people” (Hos 7:8)? The sin of increasing worldliness is the church’s first downward and tragic step in the spiral of backsliding.

2. Worldliness bends the church towards further backsliding and into a hardening condition of unbelief. Jesus Himself complained of His generation, “But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented” (Mat 11:16-17).

2

Is this not a picture of the church today? If the funeral tune of the Law is preached, how many sinners are mourning? If the wedding tune of the Gospel is proclaimed, how many mourning sinners are brought to rejoicing? In general, we can say that the Law no longer seems to cause trembling, and the Gospel no longer seems to provoke jealousy....Could we confess, “I have become hardened to the Law and to the Gospel—I fear even to hell itself”?

Even the preaching of hellish damnation is making less and less impression. And heaven? By nature, we do not want that either. An atheist once said, “You can keep your heaven and your hell. Only give me this earth.” We may not dare to voice that, but do we live it with our lives? Unbelief makes us practical atheists. Hell is no longer hell, heaven is no longer heaven, grace is longer grace, sin is no longer sin, Christ is no longer Christ, God is no longer God, and the Bible is no longer the everlasting Word of God.

Unbelief also makes us hardened to the truth. We may know the truth in our minds, but it will burn us eternally if it does not become engrafted into our hearts...

3. Unbelief leads the church to backslide further into a hardened condition of indifference. It leads us to lose all concern for the truth. How many are truly concerned to hear true doctrine from the pulpit, to hear about *death* in Adam and *life* in Christ? Are we concerned about guarding the foundational doctrines of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility? Do we delight to hear both of them preached fully as they flow out of the biblical text being expounded?

We should desire to hear all the rich doctrines of Scripture preached in their fullness, all of which are grounded in the heart of the Gospel, Jesus Christ and Him crucified, as spokes are grounded in the hub of a wheel. Are we interested in the doctrines of God’s never-ending love and full redemption through the blood of Christ? Do we care to understand the necessity of the Holy Spirit, justification, sanctification, and perseverance?

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We need to cherish experimental doctrine rather than being indifferent to it. Does it concern us whether we hear about the necessity of saving grace, the fullness of it, and its fruit?

Finally, we must not be indifferent to hearing about the marks of grace—marks that separate the work of God from the work of man, saving faith from temporary faith, true trembling (Phi 2:12) from devilish trembling (Jam 2:19), and abiding convictions from common convictions.

3

We live in a fearfully indifferent and careless time. We must acknowledge that true doctrine is fading more and more in our world and in our hearts. Concern for the truth is disappearing, and most of the distinctions mentioned above are becoming increasingly unknown, even in the minds of church members....Some can no longer see the difference between biblically experiential and outwardly historical marks of grace. They do not take the time to read the works of our forefathers and study the differences; they hear no difference, being indifferent.

By nature, we care for none of these things. We live on the same level as beasts. Our lives seem to be little more than work, eating, sleeping, and dying. We are bent toward backsliding for our own names' sake and our own lives. We place self above true doctrine, and this is why we can go on living unconverted.

God's people love preaching that is searching, experimental, and discriminatory, no matter how difficult or stressful it may be. By nature, we prefer a false assurance or a presumptuous claim, but God's people would rather be killed than deceived. They know by experience that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). They know, too, that it is far easier to be deceived than to know truth. Therefore, no flood of tears, no nights of prayer alone with God, and no counterfeit message (no matter how close it is to the genuine) will satisfy them. God's people need more than tears, prayers, repentance, unworthiness, and humility. They need something and someone outside of themselves. They need Christ. They need Christ and His real doctrine burned onto their souls by the Holy Spirit. God's people can never experience it enough. They cry, "Lord, seal it home with Thy Divine stamp of approval that I may know it is Thy doctrine inscribed on the walls of my soul, and not my own doctrine—not my own inscriptions, tears, and works."

Their lives are characterized by seeking more and more doctrine worked by the Spirit, experienced

by the soul, and blessed by heaven. They yearn for the truth that will set them free and drive away doubt with its overwhelming power—a truth that will soften and bless their

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souls. Such truth comes down from God and leads back up to Him. Is this your desire also, or is your religion nothing but tradition mixed with common convictions now and then? Does a little religion, a little knowledge, satisfy your conscience, and then do you set your soul aside? Are you content with the scaffolding of religion without knowledge of the heart?

If you honestly must answer yes, then you are backsliding further every day, every sermon, every Sabbath. It is a hard but real truth: by nature, we are asking the Lord for the shortest way to condemnation. We are bent toward backsliding ourselves directly into hell. May the Lord open our eyes before it is too late!

4. Indifference produces its close companion on the road of backsliding: ignorance. When we look back to Edwards, Whitefield, Owen, Bunyan, and dozens more of our forefathers and consider that their sermons were understood by the common people, we must fear that what the Lord said of Israel is also true of the church today: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos 4:6).

5. Spiritual and intellectual ignorance of the truth leads to the fatal plague of spiritual deadness in the church. God's people must begin with themselves. What happened to the times when people were often weekly moved, shaken, and convicted by the Lord? Should they not confess today, "Oh, that it could happen once a month or once a year"? Where are the active, current exercises of spiritual life? "Oh," they confess, "It is so dead! And the rest is all spoiled manna."

6. Spiritual deadness bends backsliding into man-centeredness. If man is the center of the church, man becomes the subject of all talk, either idolized or criticized, and God and His Word are set aside. Conversation centering on office-bearers and ministers multiplies, and we judge others. One minister is good; another, fair; a third, not good at all. We live in a day when ministers are evaluated according to man-made scales, rather than the divine scales of God's Word and testimony....Man-centeredness is an awful curse on the church, a dreadful blasphemy of God's Name, the fruit of spiritual deadness, and a sure guarantee for no personal blessing unless the Lord breaks it down! This is clearly illustrated by the story of a woman who received a blessing under the first sermon she heard by Ebenezer Erskine...she traveled many miles to hear him again, but received no blessing. Erskine received the grace and wisdom to reply, "Woman, that is easy to explain. Yesterday you came to hear the Word of Jesus Christ, and today you came to hear the words of Ebenezer Erskine."

7. This brings us to the last step of a backsliding church: man-centeredness yields the fruit of an unholy or no holy expectation from God. *Unholy* expectation is based on man's activities and created by attaching God's Name and blessing to them. In this, we

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do not realize that we have forfeited all expectation from our side. *No holy* expectation is usually the fruit of a pious, man-centered unworthiness, which drags God down to the level of man.

Oh, for churches overflowing with souls who are filled with holy expectation in God and a proper realization of their own unworthiness! The Spirit alone works holy expectation, which looks beyond self and man. Although our sins pile up to heaven, holy expectation sees that Christ's satisfying and substitutionary righteousness ascends still higher to the very throne of God with His Father's own stamp of approval. On that basis, holy expectation pleads and intercedes at the throne of grace—not with a small god, but with the great triune God of heaven and earth! Holy expectation cannot be content with worldliness, unbelief, indifference, and ignorance. It abhors backsliding and seeks the honor of God, the conversion of poor sinners, and the welfare of the church!

The church's only hope is God, for He alone can revive His backsliding church. Pray that He would remember us in Christ Jesus, the only pleading and expectation ground! May He send forth His Spirit and revive both our churches and us...may man be crucified, the world despised, Satan shamed, and interceders at the throne of grace multiplied. May God Himself receive His rightful place among us by Divine conquest: "He, all in all; we, nothing at all!"

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<https://www.monergism.com/signs-backsliding-churches>. Retrieved April 14, 2022.